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Good Fences Make Good Neighbors

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Good Fences Make Good Neighbors

Sandra Joireman

It is in the best interest of the United States to urge a rapid demarcation of the Ethiopian–Eritrean border. *Full Recommendations, page 4.*

Summary:

A ceasefire in the border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea is only the beginning of the process of conflict resolution that must occur for peace to take hold. The border war is the result of long standing distrust and animosity between these two countries. Therefore the possibility of the conflict erupting into violence again is high unless serious internal and international effort is put into the demarcation of the border and the acceptance of that demarcated border as fair.

The United States needs to work towards strengthening its relationship with Ethiopia in particular, as this has been damaged by its reactions to the border war. Ethiopia is our most important, and possibly our only ally in the Horn of Africa. Its efforts at democratization, its size and its relative stability make it essential to the promotion of US interests in the entire Horn region. It is therefore necessary for the United States to build strong relations with Ethiopia as well as encourage peace and economic development. ❖

Efforts to resolve the border conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea have been characterized by a complete lack of trust on the part of both countries. Hence the decision of Prime Minister Meles Zenawi to “fight while we negotiate and negotiate while we fight.” Once a ceasefire between the parties is negotiated, the conflict will not be fully resolved; therefore it is essential for the United States and other countries to facilitate a rapid demarcation of the border that is satisfactory to both parties. Without a mutually satisfactory border the likelihood for further violent conflict is high as the border area has now become imbued with deep political meaning as a physical manifestation of nationalism and the respect for sovereignty.

Origins of the Conflict

Serious economic problems between the two countries began in 1997. Ethiopia was, at that point, already angry with Eritrea about excessively high port charges that Ethiopia had to pay in order to export its coffee crop through Assab. The two countries shared a common currency, the Ethiopian birr, and Ethiopia was upset that Eritrea was using birr to acquire dollars and thereby tightening the money supply in both countries. In 1997, Eritrea came out with its own currency. Ethiopia insisted that interstate transactions be conducted in dollars, which put economic pressure on Eritrea as it then had to pay for imports of food and other Ethiopian resources in dollars. By the end of 1997 what had been a cordial relationship between the two countries had broken down.

The physical confrontation began when armed Eritrean troops crossed the de facto border at Badme. According to the Ethiopian government, Eritrean troops entered Ethiopia in violation of an existing agreement that prohibited the crossing of the border by armed military per-

sonnel. Ethiopian police reminded the Eritrean soldiers of this agreement and asked them to leave their weapons if they wished to enter Ethiopia. The Eritrean troops refused to comply and opened fire on the Ethiopian police, killing two.

The Eritreans claim that Badme is their own territory based on maps from the Italian colonial era. The Eritrean government alleges that after 1991 the Ethiopian government had a systematic policy of attempting to expand their northern province of Tigray through the acquisition of Eritrean territory. They claim that in 1992 Tigray administration officials crossed the true border and put new border markers deep in Eritrean territory. Subsequently Ethiopians from the Tigray region moved into this newly reclaimed area and Eritreans living there began to be harassed. Attempts to peacefully resolve the conflict were allegedly met with further territorial aggression and harassment by the Ethiopians until the Eritrean troops were called into protect the interests of the local people.

Ethiopia has acknowledged that there are problems with the demarcation of the border between the two countries. However, Eritrean movement into the Badme area was seen as a violation of Ethiopian sovereignty due to the fact that Badme had never been administered by an Eritrean government, not since 1991 and not during the Italian colonial period. A bilateral border commission had been established to resolve the border conflicts, but the Eritrean military takeover of Badme moved the dispute out of the realm of diplomacy and into the realm of armed conflict.

The conflict erupted into violence sporadically from May 1998 until May 2000. On May 12, 2000 a week after yet another attempt to resolve the conflict through negotiation failed and two days

before the Ethiopian parliamentary elections, Ethiopia went on the offensive and within two weeks had driven deep into Eritrean territory. It was able to reclaim all the disputed territory around Badme and take land in the West and South of Eritrea. Now Ethiopia holds the upper hand in negotiations and says it will not withdraw from the area it occupies until a peacekeeping force takes those areas over. At the same time, Ethiopia has been engaged in proximity talks mediated by the Organization of African Unity and has also been moving offensively on the Assab front.

Effects of the Conflict

Apart from the 120,000 casualties (est.) incurred by both sides, there are estimates that nearly a quarter of Eritrea's population had to flee their homes to get away from the fighting. Thus the human toll to both sides, and particularly the Eritreans, has been profound. The countries have also spent large sums of money on arms and provisions for troops at the front. These are funds that are taken away from development, education and drought relief. Figures range between 300-400 million dollars spent on arms by both countries last year. A UN arms embargo was placed on both countries in May, but it was too little too late. It will have little effect on the conflict, and has done much to damage relations between the US and the UK and Ethiopia. To the human costs and opportunity costs of the war we must also add ecological damage. Fighting has occurred in what is a very fragile and arid ecosystem. Not only are farmers not able to plant crops in the contested areas, which will certainly worsen the affects of the three year drought the Horn is undergoing at the present time, but fighting has polluted the whole border region with the detritus of war, from landmines and shell casings to rotting corpses.

Policy Failures

So far the United States has had two strategies to deal with the conflict. One, followed from the earliest days of the conflict originated in the State Department under the auspices of Susan Rice. It seemed to follow the Hippocratic adage "first, do no harm." The US State Department has encouraged both countries to peacefully solve their problems through the OAU peace process, and employed special envoy Tony Lake to push the countries towards that goal. When the May 2000 offensive began, this apparently was no longer sufficient. Perhaps it was the juxtaposition of media images of starving children in the Ogaden and tanks moving across the border. Whatever the impetus, a UN diplomatic mission headed by US Ambassador to the United Nations Richard Holbrooke diverted its itinerary from the Congo to the Horn of Africa because of indications (shipments of blood plasma to the front lines) that active fighting was about to begin again.

After meeting with the leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea, Holbrooke left the area declaring the conflict to be "senseless" and solvable "through diplomatic means." The US then pushed forward a plan to establish an arms embargo for both countries through the United Nations Security Council. Resolution 1298 was passed on May 17, 2000. It provided for a complete embargo to both countries for a year.

While Eritrea was relatively quiet about the resolution, Ethiopians were incensed. The streets of Addis Ababa were filled with demonstrators stoning the US and UK embassies and burning Bill Clinton and Tony Blair in effigy. From the Ethiopian perspective, the arms embargo punished them for defending their sovereignty. Ethiopian relations with the US

have since deteriorated and the war continues apace.

Having Impact

If the United States is to have a serious impact in the Horn of Africa, where we have both economic and humanitarian interests, it is essential that we form a more constructive relationship with Ethiopia. Prior to the outbreak of the border war Ethiopia was a major player in peace efforts in Sudan and economic development in the region through the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD). Ethiopia is also the only country in the Horn that is engaged in democratization. With a major conflict between Ethiopia and Eritrea, the constructive role IGAD played in the region is virtually gone and there is no country in the Horn with which the United States can do business, either economically or diplomatically. Moreover, at the present moment, our efforts to play both sides in

the border conflict has led to a frosty relationship with Ethiopia which will ultimately be damaging to US interests.



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How to stabilize the Horn of Africa:

1. Use all possible means to force Ethiopia and Eritrea to agree on a demarcation of the border satisfactory to both parties. Until this happens any peace that exists will be fragile.
2. Increase US investment and trade initiatives in Ethiopia. Particularly now with the passing of the Africa Growth and Opportunity Act there are opportunities to increase a positive US role in the country.
3. Once the conflict ends, resurrect the political role of IGAD through a focus on refugee issues. This is a role IGAD has had in the past; it will be both necessary and uncontroversial once conflict ends.

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